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ABSTRACT

Site-based management, parental choice, and accountability for the efficient, effective, and economic use of public resources in England and Wales were key themes of the 1988 Education Reform Act. The 1993 Education Act opened the way for greater choice in the marketplace by encouraging specialization and/or selection by aptitude/ability in existing new schools. As a result of the 1993 Education Act, schools will now have to make long-term strategic marketing choices. This paper attempts to answer the following questions: (1) As schools in England and Wales face the realities of a second, and potentially radical wave of market forces, will they advertise and sell an increasingly parent-determined product to attract resources in order to survive? (2) Or will schools adopt a philosophy of societal marketing, with a client rather than product focus that will integrate their strategic planning and marketing? The paper briefly considers some of the dilemmas that parental choice presents to a decentralized education service. It suggests a role for marketing theory in exploring the needs and perceptions of parents, and then describes a possible role for strategic educational marketing planning as a means of informing professional judgment and educating parental choice. Preliminary findings of the Parent and School Choice Interaction Study (1993) suggest that schools continue to respond to choice and competition by increasing their focus on promotional activities. Unless schools actively develop a marketing approach that shapes a coherent program of change and educates client perceptions of need, they will increasingly be driven by a middle-class planning agenda, which will further sharpen the divisions within British society. Contains 24 references. (LMI)

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MARKETING, PARENTAL CHOICE AND STRATEGIC PLANNING: AN OPPORTUNITY OR DILEMMA FOR UK SCHOOLS?

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MARKETING, PARENTAL CHOICE AND STRATEGIC PLANNING:

AN OPPORTUNITY OR DILEMMA FOR UK SCHOOLS?

BY CORRIE GILES

Abstract

Site-based management, parental choice and accountability for the efficient, effective and economic use of public resources in England and Wales were the key themes of the 1988 Education Reform Act. The commitment to improving quality by means of market forces was explored further in the 1992 White Paper "Choice and Diversity". The subsequent 1993 Education Act opened the way to greater variety, and therefore choice, in the educational market-place by encouraging specialisation and/or selection by aptitude/ability in existing or new schools.

As schools in England and Wales increasingly face the harsh realities of a second, and potentially more radical wave of market forces, will they advertise and sell an increasingly parent determined product to attract resources, and therefore survive? Or will schools adopt a philosophy of societal marketing, with a client rather than product focus which will integrate their strategic planning and marketing?

This paper will briefly consider some of the dilemmas presented to a decentralised education service by parental choice. It will suggest a role for marketing theory in exploring the needs and perceptions of parents, and then a possible role for strategic educational marketing planning as a means of establishing an approach to marketing which both informs professional judgement, and educates parental choice.

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MARKETING, PARENTAL CHOICE AND STRATEGIC PLANNING: AN OPPORTUNITY OR DILEMMA FOR UK SCHOOLS?

BY CORRIE GILES

THE FIRST PHASE OF REFORM: SETTING THE CONTEXT

The 1980's saw the introduction of successive legislative reforms in England and Wales which culminated in the 1988 Education Reform Act, and led to the introduction of a competitive educational marketplace. In this first wave of radical reform, traditional relationships in the education service were fundamentally altered so that:

* power was centralised in the hands of central government, with the authority for decision making over the use of resources decentralized to the schools;
* a form of site-based management known as local management of schools (LMS) was phased in over a period of four years, with funding allocated largely by a pupil driven formula;
* the power of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and the teachers unions was, in effect, greatly reduced;
* governance of schools was altered so that community representatives held real authority in terms of the management of resources, including the hiring, firing, rewarding and disciplining of staff;
* schools were presented with a centrally determined site-based planning agenda which included the introduction of a National Curriculum alongside national testing, recording

and reporting of student attainment;

* educational outcomes were to be assessed against national performance indicators such as SAT results; national 16+ and 18+ examination league tables; 16+ staying-on rates and student attendance and truancy statistics;
* competition was encouraged by allowing parental choice of school, and also by introducing a limited number of alternative forms of schooling such as City Technology Colleges and Grant Maintained Schools, both of which were outside of LEA control.

THE MARKETING RESPONSE OF SCHOOLS

With parental choice and site-based management as the key elements of government policy, competition between schools for pupils, and therefore resources, was intended to lead the drive to improve standards of teaching and learning, and make schools more accountable for the efficient, effective and economic use of their resources.

In order to operate successfully in the new educational market place, schools needed to change "from a predominant focus on teaching and administration, to one of strategic planning, policy formulation and implementation" (Hardikes, 1988). However, with the rare exception of schools in LEAs such as Cambridgeshire and Cheshire where limited schemes of local financial management (LFM) were operating successfully, schools not only had no experience of managing in a decentralised environment, but had been sheltered by their LEAs from the full effects of earlier legislation (1980 Education Act) intended to enable parental

choice of school.

Typically schools displayed a poverty of strategic thinking in their newly decentralized planning environment (Long and Robinson, 1989) and became overly concerned with financial and National Curriculum issues. Although operating in an educational market place, they displayed little understanding of marketing, either as a concept or as a process (Wheale, 1989), with marketing activity usually limited to selling, advertising and promotion in order to recruit and retain pupils. In marketing terms they were:

> "amateurish about internal analysis of their own strengths and weaknesses; their forward planning; their communication and negotiation with parents and the social environment" (Bradbury, 1990).

As a result, selling, advertising or promotional advice became the focus in some of the earlier literature and in the popular educational press (Davies, 1988; Dennison, 1989; Hardie, 1991).

Certainly the marketing activities of some schools began to give cause for concern, and Maden (1990) was quick to caution against adopting quick fix marketing approaches. She stressed instead the importance of a value driven approach in the educational market place:

> "marketing must be rooted in the educational purposes of the school and the needs of parents, pupils and community".

Maden's views echoed the earlier work of Kotler (1979), who warned of the problems likely to be faced by schools "entering the marketing arena with more enthusiasm than understanding". Kotler was particularly concerned about schools adopting a philosophy of marketing more appropriate to the business community. He proposed a client rather than product orientated approach, which he now refers to as the **marketing concept**, and is concerned with:

> "determining the needs and wants of target markets and delivering the desired satisfactions more effectively than competitors do" (Kotler and Armstrong, 1994).

In order to avoid product orientated marketing approaches Kotler (op.cit.) suggested that schools should engage in market analysis, resource analysis and mission analysis in their internal and external environments. This would enable schools to collect client orientated management information, which could then be used to inform a process of **market orientated institutional planning** concerned with the:

> "implementation, and control of carefully formulated programmes designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets to achieve institutional objectives" (Kotler and Fox, 1985).

CHOICE AND THE IMPACT ON SCHOOLS

The linking of the **client orientated marketing concept** with

rational planning models is not without problems, and presents schools with a number of potential dilemmas.

Firstly, the philosophy of client orientated marketing stresses the need for an organization to identify the needs, wants and desires of its various client groups as a basis for planning their marketing policies. This view assumes that parents (as an example of only one of the client groups served by a school) actually do know what they need, and that institutional plans are not being determined by short-term wants and demands. Certainly some of the recent research in England and Wales (West and Varlaam, 1991; West, 1992) does seem to assume that parental choice equates with need, and could well be contributing to distorted professional perceptions in this key area.

In their latter work Kotler and Fox (op.cit.) recognise the possible conflicts between short-term consumer wants and long-term consumer welfare, and elaborate upon a societal concept of marketing which:

> "holds that the organization should determine the needs, wants and interests of target markets. It should then deliver the desired satisfaction more effectively and efficiently than competitors in a way that maintains or improves the consumers's *and the society's* well being".

The societal marketing approach seems to be a step forward in emphasising the importance of client wants and needs being weighed against the exercise of professional judgement. However,

professional judgement is unlikely to be valid unless the schools' marketing process not only conforms to the societal marketing approach of identifying need, but also informs and educates parental opinion.

A second dilemma of the educational marketplace concerns the ability of schools to obtain quality data on the needs of parents. Such data will be of limited value unless schools can afford the services of professional market researchers, rather than the services of part-time educational amateurs with a poor conceptual grasp of marketing theory. Or are we professionally comfortable with the prospect of a national education system shaped by 25,000 schools adopting a simplistic stimulus response marketing model (Glatter and Woods, 1993) which "bundles together" the needs, wants and demands of parents, and then decides upon a range of educational products which will give the greatest short-term satisfaction?

A third dilemma generated by the educational marketplace is that of product definition, which underlines the difficulty facing schools regardless of whether they adopt a product, marketing or societal marketing approach for relating to their external environments. After all what is the product of a school - examination results; good discipline, a lack of anti-social behaviour?

The problem of product definition in education is particularly well illustrated in the UK at the time of writing, with heated public debates taking place between various interest groups concerning the National Curriculum, in particular the content of the history syllabus; the nature of religious education teaching

in schools, and a set of issues concerned with the content of sex education programmes, in particular the legality and morality of teaching birth control to students under the age of 16.

A SECOND PHASE OF REFORM

However, product definition is set to take on new system wide meaning as the 1993 Education Act introduces a second wave of reform with major marketing and planning implications for schools. The legislation has considerably enhanced the autonomy of schools by allowing them the right to choose to apply to:

* change their character;
* specialise in terms of curriculum, and
* select pupils by ability.

In addition, schools will need to assess the strategic implications of the gradual demise of LEAs, and their likely phased replacement from April 1994 by a government body known as the Funding Agency for Schools (FAS). There are also open discussions in the media over the introduction of voucher schemes, and renewed pressures from government for schools to opt out of LEA control and elect for centrally-funded grant maintained status. This renewed emphasis on parental choice and diversity of schooling will means that:

> "schools will have to decide individually their strategic direction in the educational market place, identify the type of school that they intend to

become, and plan the range of services that they intend to provide for their various client groups". (Giles, 1994).

MARKETING, CHOICE, AND THE ABILITY TO PLAN

As a result of the 1993 Education Act, schools will now be in the difficult position of having to make long-term strategic marketing choices, which will require them to urgently review their long-term plans. Hanson and Henry (1992), in a key paper, suggest a way forward by linking strategic planning and strategic educational marketing as the means of providing a longer-term view of the strategic direction of the school in the wider educational market place:

> "Strategic planning involves defining the organisation's mission and developing methods and strategies to achieve that mission in the most effective way possible. If strategic planning enables an educational system to envision its future, then strategic marketing is the communication technology used by managers to link the realities of the present with the expectations of the future".

If the rational planning model proposed by Hanson and Henry (op.cit.) can be linked with the societal marketing approach proposed by Kotler and Armstrong (op.cit), schools may be better placed to mitigate some of the dilemmas of parental choice referred to earlier. Yet the preliminary findings of the Parent

and School Choice Interaction Study (PASCI, January 1993) suggest that schools are still responding to choice and competition by increasing their emphasis on promotional activities. With rare exceptions, they still do not seem to have in place a professional approach to marketing which systematically informs and shapes their strategic planning process.

Progress in linking societal marketing with market orientated institutional planning also seems unlikely at present, as schools have found rational planning difficult during the recent period of extensive innovation and change. Recent research by Giles (op. cit.) with an opportunity sample of 106 teachers from different schools provides evidence of a lack of success with the rational planning models recommended by the Department of Education and Science (DES) at the outset of the LMS initiative (DES, 1989; DES, 1991).

Although not generalisable to the school population as a whole, the survey revealed that 58% of the sample did not have a strategic plan; 10% did not have the mandatory operational plan, and that 42% of the sample did not have action plans to ensure implementation of their operational plans. Perhaps more worryingly, 54% of respondents indicated that, although plans existed throughout the school, they were not closely linked with each other.

In terms of interacting with a variety of potential client groups, the respondents indicated a lack of involvement of key stakeholders in the planning process, which is perhaps indicative of prevailing attitudes towards societal marketing. In the schools concerned, only 5% involved parents; 34% involved

governors and 2% involved students! In about half of the schools surveyed:

* planning seemed ad hoc, with little whole-school strategic planning taking place;
* there appeared to be little conscious link between the aims and objectives of the school identified in a strategic plan, and the use of resources to implement the priorities for change identified in operational plans;
* operational plans seemed isolated from both a strategic plan, as well as from action plans concerned with implementing the priorities for change.

These results certainly support the views expressed by Mintzberg (1994), who criticises rational planning models as the 'design school' approach to strategic planning. Although Mintzberg recognises the benefits of rational models in terms of their being creative, systematic, value driven, socially responsible, and long-term, he also questions their feasibility in uncertain and complex planning contexts.

As an alternative approach, Mintzberg argues that arriving at recognisable expectations of the future will, of necessity, be a combination of intended and emergent planning strategies. This argument only seems to offer a way forward if emergent planning strategies are based upon a well founded marketing philosophy and professional market research. The danger otherwise is that schools will be 'blowing in the wind' of parental wants and desires, with little strategic view of the future.

CONCLUSION

In the current political and legislative environment in the UK, schools must plan and will, therefore, need to face up to a fourth dilemma, that of choosing between rational and emergent planning models in an increasingly competitive planning environment. Although schools have been slow to adopt professionally appropriate approaches to marketing and site-based planning in the first phase of decentralization, with the advent of a second wave of reform, they now have even further to go in terms of improving their strategic planning capability and professionalising their approach to the educational marketplace.

Certainly schools are leaner, fitter, and more aware of their reputations, but to a large extent they are still reacting in a promotional and advertising sense from behind the barricades of ill-informed professional judgement or poorly conceived and amateurish market research.

Even though the integrated strategic market planning approach offers positive advantages, unless schools can develop their strategic capability to invest in actively developing a marketing approach which shapes and informs a coherent programme of change, and which educates client perceptions of need, they will increasingly be driven by a middle-class planning agenda, which will further enhance the divisions which are still all too apparent in British society.

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